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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIJING 015260

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TAGS: PGOV PREL PHUM KCUL SOCI CH  
SUBJECT: MIDDLE EAST CRISIS GRABS HEADLINES IN CHINA

REF: BEIJING 2467

Classified By: Classified by Political Internal Unit Chief Susan A. Thornton. Reasons 1.4 (b/d).

Summary

¶1. (C) As violence flares in the Middle East, China's broadcast and print media are providing a steady diet of colorful coverage. The public is showing more interest in the Arab-Israeli conflict now than during previous outbreaks of violence, contacts said, in part because of fears about how events might affect gas prices. Evacuation of Chinese nationals from Lebanon has also grabbed attention as a human interest story. The Propaganda Department has issued no coverage guidelines and the tone of most reporting has been straightforward. Nonetheless, journalists said most outlets are being careful not to run content that might stir passions among China's Muslims, noting that most opinion pieces and television commentators have shied away from providing detailed background about Hamas and Hezbollah's roles in the conflict. Tens of thousands of netizens are making their views known online, with some voicing sharp criticism of Israel and the United States and others praising Israel for its tough stance against terrorism. End Summary.

Top Foreign Story

¶2. (C) Most of China's major daily newspapers have given considerable coverage to the Israel-Lebanon conflict over the past week, usually including photos and graphics. While the release of China's strong economic statistics for the first half of 2006 dominated midweek front pages, many covers included teasers to Middle East stories in inside sections. The foreign affairs tabloid Global Times, however, which is under the People's Daily editorial umbrella, ran several front page pictures, including one on July 20 depicting two Israeli soldiers struggling away from a firefight. The People's Daily itself dedicated a full page to Middle East coverage on July 21.

No Guidelines

¶3. (C) The Propaganda Department has issued no coverage guidelines, said Zhou Qing'an, a free lance writer who contributes commentary on international issues to the progressive Beijing News. He said he is considering writing an analysis of the conflict for the paper and called a contact at the Xinhua News Agency to get clarification about editorial rules. He was surprised, he said, to learn that there are none at this time. While Chinese news outlets generally have more latitude in covering international stories,

Zhou acknowledged that in the past the authorities regularly issued guidance about how to treat Middle East crises. Publications generally needed to express support for the Palestinians and be critical of the United States and Israel. "This time there is nothing" from the censors, Zhou said, and the result has been mainly objective reports.

#### Coverage Conundrum

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**¶4.** (C) The violence presents a conundrum for Chinese media, said Zhang Xiantang (protect), an editor at the China Economic Times. On one hand, it offers a prime opportunity to criticize the United States and Israel, an editorial tack that sells papers and is unlikely to attract unwelcome attention from the censors. But on the other hand, editors are cognizant of social stability issues and are being careful not to provide China's Muslims with a cause around which to rally.

(Note: The Chinese media tread carefully earlier this year when covering the protests related to the Prophet Mohammed cartoons, reftel.) In addition, despite the blanket coverage, much media content is superficial, said Dong Yuyu (protect), a journalist at Party mouthpiece Guangming Daily. In his view, print commentators and television talking heads are pulling their punches and not discussing the detailed background of the conflict. One reason is that the Chinese Government is reluctant to "offend Arab countries," he surmised.

#### Increased Interest

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**¶5.** (C) Regular Chinese readers and viewers are showing more interest now than during previous outbreaks of violence in the Middle East, partly because they feel the unfolding events have the potential to affect their lives. Fears about the higher gas prices are part of this, said Li Tao (protect), a professor at the Tsinghua University School of Journalism and Communications. Moreover, with more and more Chinese traveling and working overseas, the story of the evacuation of Chinese from Lebanon has attracted much attention from the public, Li observed. In fact, the high-circulation Beijing Youth Daily has run coverage of the evacuation of Chinese citizens and their arrival in Cyprus throughout the week.

#### Internet Buzz

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**¶6.** (C) Internet news portals are covering the events in the Middle East with the same intensity as the print media. Several sites have invited prominent foreign affairs scholars to participate in web chats on the issue. In fact, the conflict has energized Internet chat rooms as tens of thousands of netizens are voicing a broad range of views. Many online forum participants are expressing support for the Palestinians and Hezbollah, mainly charging that Israel is a proxy actor for an "imperialist" United States. But there is no shortage of vocal backing for Israel. A typical post on a July 20 Sina.com chat room read, "Israel represents advancement and should be supported! Hezbollah represents terrorism and should be destroyed!"

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